

# STARTING AND RUNNING BOOK DISCUSSION GROUPS: READING GROUPS AND READING SELECTIONS, INCLUDING WHAT CONSTITUTES A "JEWISH BOOK"

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**Description:** This paper discusses how to select books for reading groups, various kinds of reading groups to organize, and the benefits of belonging to a book discussion group. I end with an exploration of what constitutes a "Jewish book."

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**Elizabeth F. Stabler** (Liza) is the librarian at Congregation Emanu-El of New York City, where she runs two book discussion groups and participates in a third. She also initiated the book discussion group program at the 92nd Street Y. Liza continues to facilitate several sections of the group she founded. After graduating from Columbia University's School of Library Service with honors, Liza served as librarian in an independent school in New York City, following which she was the librarian at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA for six years. She has also interviewed authors for a local cable television program.

## Book Selection

### 1. How and what to choose

- a. Choosing the books for a group is not a science, nor should it be intimidating
- b. People are willing to read what's assigned
- c. Choose according to the reading, education and interest level of the group.
- d. Remember that the group will reflect the community and institution it's connected with
- e. Make certain there is a variety of styles, authors, and levels of difficulty on the list
- f. Many groups only choose books that are in

paperback.

- g. Make sure if that the book is available from the library – the institution's or public.
- h. Group members may wish to follow a certain theme or read particular kinds of books.
- i. There are many guides for reading groups, both in book form, and on publisher's web pages. Also look at the lists of UAHC (Union of American Hebrew Congregations).
- j. In a Jewish setting, most of the books will be explicitly Jewish in content or interest.

### 2. Choosing books for different kinds of groups – a few examples

- a. Short story group – I use 4 anthologies with multiple copies available in the library to avoid copyright violations. I choose 2-3 stories per 1-hour session, 1 female and 1 male author and make certain 1 of the authors will be recognized by most members.
- b. Helen Singer, of Stephen Wise Free Synagogue involves the reading group members in the selection. She gives the group participants a list of synopses with reviews of books proposed by the members of the group for the next year's list. The participants do the further research and vote.
- c. Informal – members suggest books which they have to have read before proposing.
- d. Librarian-led and Sponsored Group – Librarian (or facilitator) makes a list of proposed books and meet with the liaison of the sponsoring group, such as the Men's Club or Sisterhood, to narrow down the choices, checking to see what's in paperback and also available at the public library.

e. Reading Group for fee at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y -- I choose books based on past interest, what I want to read, as well as participants' suggestions. The books don't all have to be of Jewish interest for this group.

f. Affiliation group – groups may form to read particular kinds of work, such as Israeli fiction, cookbooks, history, etc..

### 3. What works best

a. Avoid most best sellers as they tend towards formula writing

b. Best choices are “midlist” books – well written dealing with ideas and issues. Style, structure, variety of story

c. Be careful of the literary avant-garde. While of great interest, these books may “lose” some members and may be hard to discuss.

### 4. Some pointers

a. Don't make ageist or sexist assumptions.

b. Provide biographical backgrounds and reviews

c. Facilitator doesn't have to have read the book before assigning it

d. If it turns out to be the “wrong” book, examine why it didn't work

e. For a book to work, it doesn't have to be either the best written or well liked

f. Trust your instincts. If you're passionate about a subject or interested in expanding your own knowledge, you can be assured that you'll be able to engage others.

## **Kinds of Groups**

### 1. What they read

a. There's a long Jewish tradition of examining the text in a group setting. Daf Yomi, Weekly parsha, study of sacred texts in a group setting might well be defined as book groups.

b. Nonfiction

c. Fiction

d. Single-author

e. Genres – mystery, romance, historical novels, travel books.

f. Literary forms such as short stories, poetry, drama, classics, etc.

### 2. Who's in them

a. Mixed groups

b. Mother-daughter

c. Child-parent

d. Men only

e. Women only

f. Internet

g. Work place group

h. Neighborhood

i. Private vs. open

j. Strangers vs. friends/acquaintances – very important dynamic difference

k. Fee-paying groups

### 3. Size of Group

- a. Minimum for a discussion is about 8 although can be done with 4
  - b. 20 is about the maximum though it will tend to foster splinter discussions
4. How often to meet
    - a. Daily – daf yomi
    - b. Once a week (parsha study group)
    - c. For non-sacred texts – once a month to every 5 or 6 weeks
  5. How book discussion groups are sponsored in a Jewish setting
    - a. Offered by an institution or group within the institution
    - b. Informally set up by a subgroup of an institution
  6. Details of managing a book group
    - a. Will there be a fee?
    - b. How will the group be publicized, if at all
    - c. Will the library buy extra copies or order copies for members
    - d. How to order materials
    - e. Will there be handouts?
    - f. Who does the research for each meeting?
    - g. Setting up schedule
    - h. Member list – will members have to commit for specific length of time
    - i. Choosing books
    - j. Determining books' availability
    - k. Announcing or distributing book list and schedule – publicity
    - l. Collecting fees and making any payments
  7. Who sponsors book groups
    - a. National organizations such as Brandies, Hadassah & National Council of Jewish Women
    - b. Private by invitation only
    - c. Institution or Organization on local level
  8. Where
    - a. Setting is important. But in New York we can't be too choosy about space
    - b. The sponsoring institution
    - c. Member's house – may rotate
    - d. Rented or borrowed neutral space
  9. When– Will affect who can come to the groups
    - a. Early morning before work
    - b. After work
    - c. Day
    - d. During Nursery School or Religious School hours
    - e. Shabbat or holiday
  10. Facilitation
    - a. Choosing to have a facilitator or leader

- b. What will be the facilitator's
- c. Members of the group may take turns leading the group

11. What to talk about. See Jacobsohn\*. For basics (for those nervous about being a part of a literary discussion), see Fineman\*.

## **Benefits**

1. Enjoyment of literature
  - Reading is a solitary activity and this is a way to share the experience
2. Exploring Jewish Identity
  - a. Participants come from very different backgrounds
  - b. Learning about Jewish history
  - c. Learning about Jewish ideas
  - d. Non-threatening way to learn about Judaism and Jews
3. Educational
  - a. Continuing ed with no marks
  - b. Learning from each other.
    - I always learn a great deal from those I'm "facilitating" in the discussion, either intellectually or personally.
  - c. Every one brings a different set of education, life-experiences and expertise.
  - d. Chance to read what a participant mightn't have chosen herself.
  - e. Stretching
  - f. Develop critical reading and thinking skills
  - g. Self-reflection and personal growth
  - h. Fulfillment of need to delve into ideas, themes deeply.
  - i. There is a great intellectual hunger out there
    - Congregants may be passive recipients of ideas; book groups allow for the exchange of ideas. May be difficult to ease them into it.
4. Affiliation through ideas and aesthetic enjoyment of text.
  - a. Builds community within an organization, especially one with diff
  - b. Social settings for interaction – structured one for those who already know each other
  - c. Meeting new people
  - d. Networking
  - e. Helps participants on group skills
  - f. Empathy for others' experiences or issues raised in text
5. Consciousness-raising and Support Groups of the 90's – *This is NOT a put-down*
  - a. Accepting, nurturing and non-judgemental group (ideal)
    - Confidentiality of group provides safe place to discuss some of the issues raised by books which may be very personal and private
  - b. Group may act to support members as they talk about their own relevant experiences
  - c. People should come out feeling better, smarter, more articulate
  - d. Learning to play together nicely - important for those without group/seminar experience

### **What Exactly Is a “Jewish Book”?**

Book Clubs (also known as Book Discussion Groups, Reading Groups, etc.) in synagogues, community centers and other Jewish institutions are usually interested in reading “Jewish books.” So, what IS a “Jewish book?” In one book discussion group I lead, the term is used as a challenge by some members to any book selected. In another, a book’s Jewishness is assumed without rancor – or any clear definition.

Many distinguished literary critics have explored what a specifically *Jewish* literature entails. In this short presentation I have time to give you only a brief and far from comprehensive digest of some thoughts on the subject. The following quotes illustrate the difficulty of the question.

Philip Roth said, “I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew.” Cynthia Ozick, on the other hand, says, “Imaginative writers are compelled to swim in the medium of culture; literature is an instrument of culture, not a summary of it. Consequently there are no major works of Jewish imaginative genius written in any Gentile language, sprung out of any Gentile culture.” (Wisse\* p.11)

The bibliography handout called “What is a Jewish book” lists sources on the subject of Jewish literature if you wish to explore further. Those articles and books will lead you to further. This is not a definitive bibliography on the subject but a start.

Most Reading Groups concentrate on secular literature written from the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. This means that the traditional Jewish texts, such as the Tanach, Talmud, Commentaries, Responsa literature and other such classics are generally studied with rabbinic or other expert guidance and are rarely chosen by groups. I’m not suggesting that they be on (or not be on) reading lists for Book Clubs – I’m simply making a distinction between the way we approach “Torah”(used in the all inclusive form) and secular literature.

Choosing books for a book club reading list is similar to selecting books for a library. If it is a work by an important (I say “important” knowing that is another controversial category which I will not define here) author who is Jewish her or his works may be included. A good example is Saul Bellow whose novels and stories do not frequently deal with Jewish issues but writes with what some readers feel is a Jewish sensibility. Whatever that means. And, he did win the Nobel prize. Then there’s Susan Sontag. Undoubtedly, she’s an important 20<sup>th</sup> Century literary figure. Yes, she’s Jewish; however, as the entry in Hyman & Moore’s *Jewish Women in America* makes clear, she’s not thus self-identified in her writing – or even personally. So, I do not include her novels on lists of “Jewish books” although I have selected her work when it wasn’t necessary to have only “Jewish books” on a reading list. Let’s consider books about Jews by non-Jewish authors, like Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* or *Daniel Deronda* by George Eliot? Surely they merit reading and discussing, as does *The Merchant of Venice*. Books with no outstanding literary merit also belong on lists of Jewish books for reading groups. What I mean is “light fiction” (again, “light” is subject to interpretation) such as mysteries and romances with Jewish characters and about Jewish history. *Just Revenge* by Alan Dershowitz is an example of a poorly written book which can inspire lots of discussion.

It should be easier to decide if a nonfiction book is “Jewish”, shouldn’t it? Readers might assume that a subject is clearly Jewish – or not. Books about Jews, our history, customs, beliefs, practices or the cultural artifacts produced and used by Jews are easy to classify as Jewish. What about memoirs or biographies whose subjects are/were Jews but whose accomplishments were not particularly Jewish. Should we read the poems of Bob Dylan or the biography of Sammy Davis, Jr.? The Men’s Club will be reading Hannah Pakula’s *An Uncommon Woman*, the biography of Victoria’s daughter who was Kaiser Wilhelm’s mother. The person who recommended as wonderful background for understanding some of the origins of the Holocaust. So, a “Jewish book” may be one while lacking an obvious Jewish subject, theme or characters, leads to a better understanding of a topic that is accepted as Jewish – or of interest to Jews as Jews.

Another approach is to think about what else makes a book Jewish per se. Readers may find a book’s values, themes, style, characters, story, or setting explicitly or even implicitly Jewish. The author may be evoking narrative tradition – such as Shalom Aleichem – which rings true as “Jewish”. Or, it a particularly outlook on life or a sense of humor – I’m thinking of a book from the 70’s: *Sheila Levine is Dead and Living in New York* by Gail Parent. Is it a certain feeling, a gestalt that is Jewish? Again, it’s easier to know what feels right, what belongs in the category of a “Jewish book” than trying to develop a formula, if we follow a reader theory approach.

I must confess that I find the impulse to dwell on what makes a book “Jewish” somewhat pointless, possibly because the controversy is incapable of resolution. I would rather keep an open, flexible attitude. When I looked through the *Jewish Book Annual’s* at least biannual essays on Jewish literature and American Jewish literature, I discovered that most of the authors seem to have had the same difficulty defining a “Jewish book” as I do and as members of our book discussion groups do, as well. Mostly these authors list the books or authors they consider Jewish without bothering with a definition. That works for me.

So, let me end by saying that I think a book can be considered if it is about Jews, by Jews or of interest to Jews as Jews.

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### **Notes**

Bibliographies available from AJL's Bibliography Bank (<http://www.jewishlibraries.org>)

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